

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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October 16, 1980**VOTING RESPONSIBILITY**
URGED BY BISHOPS

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. -- The Episcopal Church's House of Bishops has become one of the first mainline church groups to speak out against the formation of religious power blocs that have sprung up this year.

In a strongly-worded statement that was passed by a round of applause, the House declared that "'power' was the Devil's final word, not God's" and that Jesus' response to the temptations in the desert "defines forever the Christian's relationship to the world: not control, but ministry."

The issue of the role of newly-emergent religious political groups was raised the first full day of the Bishops' Oct. 2-9 interim meeting at the Read House here when Bishop Edmond Browning of Hawaii introduced a resolution asking that the pastoral letter deal "at least in part" with that issue. His request was amended to ask the Letter committee to develop a statement of Christian responsibility in exercising the right to vote.

A pastoral letter becomes a major piece of policy because Canons require that it be read from the pulpit or made available to every parishioner and the bishops paid special attention to the timeliness of this matter by hand-carrying copies away and undertaking the parochial distribution themselves.

Browning's resolution passed the House on Oct. 3 and, on Oct. 7, the Pastoral Letter committee chairman, Bishop Bennett Sims of Atlanta, presented draft copies to the bishops who then studied it and suggested changes. The final document was debated during the afternoon of Oct. 8.

From the start of that debate, it was clear that the more than 100 bishops were in general agreement on the thrust of the document and were working to make it as strong a statement as possible.

The 90-minute debate focused on changes in wording to clarify or strengthen the position with only one substantive disagreement. Attempts by Bishops Paul Moore of New York and John Krumm of Europe to rewrite a statement on abortion failed and subsequent efforts to have that portion reconsidered also failed. Moore and Krumm were concerned that the phrase "resist irresponsible and indiscriminate abortion as a heedless, casual birth control option" did not adequately restate a long-held General Convention position but they were unable to convince a majority of their brothers.

After the final approval by applause, an effort to reduce it to a "position paper" in deference to the Church outside the United States was defeated. Such a move would have denied the paper the wide hearing that the bishops sought and Sims was asked instead to include language in the introduction to make it more inclusive.

The paper notes that only about half those eligible actually vote and pleads with Christians not to fall into this "withdrawal from political responsibility." It asserts that to do so "is a denial of the biblical faith that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Nor, the bishops claim, are inadequate choices any reason to withdraw because "Our God of the Old Testament is a political intervenor because the cosmos he commands is moral at the core," and "In the New Testament, God's intervention takes the form of a self-offering in crucifixion for the very life of the world."

Beyond the need to vote, the bishops claim, is the need for informed voting: voting decisions based on set Christian principles, notably, the sacredness of human life and the call to be peacemakers.

In the discussion on the religious right, the bishops admit that "the silence of the conventional churches is partly to blame for the impact of this new coalition of strident voices." Cautioning against "narrow or bullying use of biblical texts," the prelates assert that the use of "religious radio and TV and local pulpits in support of particular candidates in the name of God distorts Christian truth and threatens American religious freedom."

In cautioning against forming counter-blocs, the bishops not only point to the wilderness experience and example of Jesus but to American colonial and constitutional history by which they assert that "religious reality. . . is intensely personal" and state: "Our founding fathers' argument was never against faith, but against monopoly and political power under religious auspices."

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NOTE: The text of the Pastoral Letter is attached.

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOPS

October 8, 1980

As bishops of the Episcopal Church meeting in the early autumn of an election year in the United States, we wish to speak of Christian responsibility in exercising the right to vote. In focusing on a national issue we are mindful of our brothers and sisters of this Church whose citizenship is in other countries. We hope that what we say will be of relevance and stimulation to them. We hold them in our prayers and ask for theirs in our forthcoming national decision-making.

Two matters concern us chiefly. Both represent extremes of religious response to the problems of political choice.

I. Our first concern is apathy. Hardly half the American people entitled to vote do so. For Christians, this withdrawal from political responsibility is faithless and immoral. To fail to vote or to be uninformed in voting is a denial of the biblical faith that Jesus Christ is Lord: the Lord of politics, economics, education, and social systems, as well as of our personal and family lives.

Since we hold that human life is sacred, our political choices need to reflect the best judgment we can make as to the people and platforms that honor all persons -- that respond to the needs of the aged, the unemployed and the disadvantaged -- that uphold racial and sexual equality -- and that resist irresponsible and indiscriminate abortion as a heedless, casual birth control option.

Our political choices also need to reflect a moral resolve that American economic structures reduce the extremeties of arrogant wealth and gross poverty which mark doomed societies. Callous biblical kingdoms were brought low by God's wrath. Contemporary societies are likewise under judgment for greed and indifference to human need. "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts" (Isaiah 3:15).

A further imperative that flows from the sacredness of human life is Christ's call that his disciples be peacemakers. Wherever possible, our voting needs to call to account the iniquity of a runaway arms capability that supplies small nations with lethal weaponry, much of it American. Our political action must deplore the daily and deadly addition that America makes to the absurd stockpile

Christians are not relieved of political decision-making just because political choices involve fallible candidates -- or because political choices must face debatable positions and points of view. To think so and act so betrays a hands-off-the-world assumption about God and his Christ which Scripture denies. Our God of the Old Testament is a political intervener because the cosmos he commands is moral at the core. No earthly sovereignty can violate that morality and endure. However, as Scripture declares, "If a king judges the poor with equity his throne will be established forever". (Proverbs 29:14). In the New Testament, God's intervention takes the form of a self-offering in crucifixion for the very life of the world.

Political withdrawal by Christians creates a vacuum that invites the tyranny of those who would use power for discrimination, oppression, and economic barbarism. That is the immorality of political apathy.

But it is not enough simply to vote. We urge informed voting, making choices on the grounds of a first principle that is biblical and basic to Christian conviction. This first principle is the sacredness of human life. From it other guideposts rise for our decision-making, all of them anchored in Scripture.

of nuclear warheads. We now have atomic megatons adequate to kill everybody in the Soviet Union twenty times over.

Since nuclear armaments here and in the Soviet Union have created a world in which the whole can nowhere be protected against its parts, our own national security has reached the zero point. The issue is no longer the survival of one nation against another. We stand now in mortal danger of global human incineration. A computer error could trigger mutually assured destruction. American responsibility for the world beyond us compels a moral outcry against the arms race.

As a way of moving us all from apathy and toward responsibility, we have offered biblical guideposts to political decision-making. It is to be expected that we will disagree on candidates and political direction. Disagreement expresses both our freedom and the ambiguity of all choices made by sinful people in a fallen world. But at a deeper level of truth, political involvement by informed voting expresses the irrepressible hope of Christians that in spite of all alarms God is the Lord of history, and that human life is a gift to be claimed from his hand, both here and hereafter.

II. Our second chief concern in this election year is the opposite extremity to apathy. It is the

sudden emergence of aggressive religious partisanship in the political arena. We insist that the use of religious radio and TV and local pulpits in support of particular candidates in the name of God distorts Christian truth and threatens American religious freedom.

As Christians we share some important commitments with the so-called Moral Majority: to the home, to the family, to the Bible -- though our understanding of reverence for Scripture compels us to resist any narrow or bullying use of biblical texts. But with our brothers and sisters of the popular TV ministry we too cherish God and country. The stars and stripes of our national banner are conspicuous in many Episcopal Churches, and we offer Eucharist on the 4th of July.

As your bishops, we speak out now because the silence of the conventional churches is partly to blame for the impact of this new coalition of strident voices. But we do not form a power lobby -- for two reasons.

First, because we are American traditionalists with regard to religion. The founders who fashioned our Constitution of the United States had great respect for the spiritual core of all human experience. But they believed the religious reality, at bottom, is intensely personal. They were also close in time to some events in

American colonial history which saw Churches snarling at each other, unable to tolerate a pluralist denominational social order. Therefore, if the individual right to religious belief and practice were to be upheld, Americans had to be protected, not only against an authoritarian anti-religious state (as has emerged in Communism) but also against a tyrannical religious monopoly.

The American colonial period is filled with instances of denominational control of parts of the colonies where deviation from territorial orthodoxy was punishable -- and often cruelly.

Puritan Massachusetts banished Quakers from their state on pain of death. In Quaker Pennsylvania during that period all citizens were subject to religious restrictions. An act passed in 1700 required all citizens to attend Church on Sunday or prove they had been at home reading the Scriptures. Failure to do so was subject to fines.

Anglicans in Virginia, at about the same time, pushed through a law which defined orthodoxy for Christians. Denial of Old and New Testament authority was illegal. Offenders could be barred from public office.

Although Maryland was opened initially to Roman Catholics under Lord Baltimore, elsewhere in the colonies

life for many of that Church was hindered by the weight of repressive legislation and popular contempt.

When it came time to document religious freedom with Constitutional guarantees, the founders, well versed in history and human behavior, denied the government all power to establish religion. Also denied was the power of the government to interfere with the free exercise of religion. Our founding fathers' argument was never against faith, but against monopoly and political power under religious auspices.

Our refusal in 1980 to entangle religion in partisan politics, and our wariness of contemporary movements that do, is rooted in a wise American tradition of avoiding the almost certain risk of political tyranny in the name of God.

Our second reason for warning against a religious power bloc in the political arena is our certainty that "power" is not the last word in our relationship with God. In the wilderness struggle of Jesus, "power" is the Devil's final word, not God's. Satan's trump temptation is to deliver into Jesus' hands "all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them". (St. Matthew 4:8)

The response of Jesus to this third seduction defines forever the Christian's relationship to the world:

not control, but ministry. Our Lord scorns a mastery founded on any sovereignty but servanthood. Servanthood means the readiness of love to sacrifice and to suffer.

Christ bids us take up the Cross, not a cudgel. We therefore summon ourselves and our people to cheerful service in Christ's love. Be courageous in conviction, tolerant of diversity, and thankful for a political heritage that is ours by gift of human struggle and divine mercy. Amen.

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